

Dear honorable chairmen, Senator Flexer and Representative Haddad, ranking members, Senator Gordon and Representative Hoxha, and distinguished members of the Higher Education Subcommittee of Appropriations. My name is Irene Soteriou, and I am a senior from Middletown, Connecticut studying Statistics and Cognitive Science at UConn Storrs.

Like so many before me, my UConn story begins with my parents. My family originally comes from Cyprus, a small island nation that for decades has remained divided after an illegal invasion that forced hundreds of thousands of people, included my own family, to flee their homes as refugees. My parents came to the United States in pursuit of a better future, and they eventually ended up settling in Connecticut because UConn took a chance on my father and offered him a job. My mother ended up going to school here as well. It's because of their time at UConn that my parents fell in love with this state, and that's why they chose to stay.

I ended up growing up in Middletown, and when it finally became time to apply to colleges, I found myself equipped with the grades and the test scores to be within the 99th percentile of applicants for virtually any school in the country. I chose to come to UConn because, thanks to scholarships from the honors department, UConn could afford me the same resources and opportunities of big-name private universities, without forcing me to accept a future forever defined by student debt.

In the years that followed, thanks to the resources available to me as a student at UConn, I've been able to coordinate large-scale initiatives in support of the success of refugees and recent immigrants in our state, founded an annual weeklong symposium, and contributed to the establishment of the university's Middle Eastern Cultural Programs. I've worked on asylum cases in Hartford, spent summers abroad working with refugee families, participated in a fellowship with the United Nations, and, today, I stand before you as a Truman Scholar.

UConn helped me find my purpose, and in fact it helped me find my home. But every day, that home is becoming increasingly more expensive, and increasingly less affordable. So, if there is one message that I'd like to leave with each of you today, particularly after coordinating today's walkout, it's this: That this generation of student leaders becomes the next generation of legislators. Legislators who, like you, will be tasked with safeguarding the future of our state, and who, like you, may someday be faced with the decision that lies before us today. All I ask of you is that you choose to continue the legacy begun by legislators before you, that you protect for future students the opportunities that previous legislators protected for me, by investing in UConn's future.

Thank you.